The F-15 ASAT- The Invitation to Struggle Accepted

The National Security Process

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10 Dec 90

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
10 DEC 1990		**-**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
The F-15 ASAT - The Invitation to Struggle Accepted	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**		**15**	

The F-15 ASAT- The Invitation to Struggle Accepted

The debate over the F-15 launched anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon demonstrated the process of policy evolution founded on conflict between the President and Congress. The argument over testing the ASAT epitomized the basic disagreement over arms control between a strong executive and a resurgent Congress; both eager to reestablish their own conception of the appropriate share of power for their respective branches.

President Reagan entered office in 1981 with what he considered was a mandate to reestablish US power through an invigorated executive branch. His approach to arms control, therefore, was to negotiate only after a position of strength was attained. That position of strength had not been achieved in the area of space control since the Soviets had an operational ASAT while the US version was still in development.

Many members of Congress, on the other hand, were concerned about the possibilities of another arms race similar to the competition that resulted after the US introduction of multiple warhead (MIRV) missiles. This basic conflict formed the philosophical foundation for the debate over the F-15 ASAT.

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how conflict between the President and the Congress modified the development and testing of the F-15 ASAT. Key players in the struggle were influenced throughout the process by internal procedures, parallel issues, and some significant external inputs.

History and the ASAT Problem

The search for a counter to Soviet space capability began with the launch of *Sputnik* in 1957. Both sides initially fielded ASAT systems but the Soviets had been more consistent in maintaining the capability.[1] In fact, the US unilaterally dismantled its last ASAT system in 1975 at about the same time that the Soviets began testing a new system that eventually achieved operational status. As testing continued on the Soviet system and reliance on space systems by the US increased, American ASAT advocates argued the need for a system to deter the growing threat to space surveillance satellites. Efforts to protect US space systems through arms control negotiations were also attempted.

The US, without an operational system in 1977, took the early initiative in arms control. In President Carter's words, our interest in a treaty was "to forego the opportunity to arm satellite bodies and also to forego the opportunity to destroy observation satellites."[2] The Soviets initially showed little interest but did agree to meet US negotiators three times between June 1978 and June 1979.

The Soviet agreement to discuss ASAT arms control coincided with the US decision to begin development of a two stage maneuvering ASAT vehicle launched from an F-15 aircraft. Both this proposed US ASAT and the existing Soviet system were effective only against objects in low earth orbit. The US system, however, had the potential for greater responsiveness and flexibility. The Soviets recognized this potential and attempted to use arms control

to prevent the system from reaching operational status. Their arguments reflected their traditional concern over defense of their homeland. Both sides were cautious about the potential risk to early warning and communications satellites --the so-called "strategic space assets"-- critical to bilateral nuclear stability.

Since most early warning and communications satellites are in higher or eccentric elliptical orbits, arms control negotiators were more concerned about escalation to more capable systems than they were about the low orbit ASATs themselves. The enthusiasm for the removal of the low orbit systems changed for each side as development of the US ASAT progressed. The Soviets became more willing to dismantle and ban existing systems as the new US ASAT approached the testing phase while the US seemed more willing to delay an accord.

President Carter discontinued the talks when bilateral relations were chilled by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979. Development of the F-15 ASAT and further testing of the operational Soviet system continued during the interruption of negotiations.

The Debate

Shortly after President Reagan and the 97th Congress took office, Senator Larry Pressler (R-SD) submitted a resolution which urged resumption of the ASAT limitations talks. The resolution was presented on 6 May 1981 and was referred to the Foreign Relations Committee. The Foreign Relations Committee, in turn, referred the issue to the Subcommittee on Arms Control, Oceans, International

Operations, and Environment which was chaired by Senator Pressler. A few months later, in August of 1981, the Soviets submitted, with great publicity, a draft treaty to the UN to ban the stationing of weapons in space. The draft was sent from the General Assembly to the Committee on Disarmament but no further action was taken.

On 4 July 82, President Reagan announced his National Space Policy which included an intention to develop and test an operational ASAT system to counter the Soviet system. This policy gave new impetus to the F-15 ASAT program. The Soviet proposal of August 81 and the newly announced Reagan space policy formed the basis for Senator Pressler's subcommittee hearings which convened in September 1982 and featured the testimony of key administration arms control experts.

One week before the hearings began, Senator Pressler wrote an article for the Christian Science Monitor which outlined his opinion that a space arms race would overshadow peaceful space initiatives. After reading the contents of his article into the Congressional Record at the start of his subcommittee's hearing, Pressler questioned Eugene Rostow, the Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), Dr. Richard DeLauer, the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Development, and other technical experts. According to these experts, the Administration was not seeking a space arms race. They said that the US ASAT program should proceed because of a real national security need. All agreed that arms control was generally a good idea but was severely complicated, in this case, by the technical difficulties

of verification and the imprecise definition of the term "weapons" in the August 81 Soviet proposal.[3] Senator Pressler disagreed and suggested that the high cost of an escalating arms race in space could be a topic for discussion as part of the appropriations process.[4] This hearing previewed the arguments that both sides would follow over the next few years.

In the ensuing months the debate over an impending arms race was conducted by academics and arms control experts with little interest from the general public until President Reagan announced his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in March of 1983. The dependence of SDI on space weaponry prompted the circulation of a petition later that spring by Richard Garwin of IBM and Dr. Carl Sagan of Cornell. The petition urged negotiations to prevent the testing and deployment of all space weaponry including SDI and ASAT systems.[5] The debate over arms control, in general, heated up further with the release of a pastoral letter on nuclear war and peace by the Catholic bishops in May. In July, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved Senator Pressler's resolution to negotiate a prompt moratorium on ASAT tests followed by a mutual and verifiable ban on ASATs. A similar resolution in the House by Rep. Joe Moakley (D-Mass) garnered 124 co-sponsors. Administration officials continued to resist pressure to negotiate, citing a need to test the new system and the difficulties of verification.[6]

The arguments for testing were persuasive to members of the House as they defeated a proposal to delay the initial test. The concerted efforts of ASAT opponents, however, resulted in the

inclusion of a provision in the annual defense authorization bill that required a special presidential certification before the system could be tested in space. This so-called "Tsongas Amendment" prohibited the use of funds unless the President certified two facts: that the US was pursuing an ASAT ban in good faith; and that ASAT testing was necessary to "avert clear and irrevocable harm to the national security."[7] This certification, due on 31 March 1984, would force the Administration to provide some evidence that negotiations were actually taking place. Consequently, ACDA began a study of ASAT arms control options to be completed by February of 1984, shortly before a test against a space-based target was to take place.[8]

The Soviets "Up the Ante"

As the tempo of debate increased in Congress, the Soviets accelerated their efforts to impose constraints on the US ASAT program with their new-found interest in space arms control. On 18 August 83, General Secretary Andropov suggested to a group of visiting US Senators a complete ban on the testing and deployment of space-based weapons that could strike targets on earth or in space. He also proposed a ban of testing and deployment of new ASATs and the destruction of existing systems. He added that the Soviets would begin a unilateral moratorium on ASAT tests. Foreign Minister Gromyko submitted these proposals as a draft treaty to the UN one week later.[9]

The Defense Department and administration arms control experts argued that these Soviet proposals were not verifiable. Some

experts outside the Administration contended that the real hesitation to ASAT limits was the potential for conflict with the President's desire for research on space-based ABM systems which might use similar technology to support the SDI.[10]

Despite the protest from Defense, the House Appropriations Committee voted on 21 October 83 to delay the deployment of the ASAT from 1987 to 1988 because of "concern over the lack of attention given by the Administration to the arms control implications of space weapons." The deletion of parts and test equipment by this bill would result in testing delays in 1985. This decision was a compromise between factions in Congress that wanted to delay both procurement and testing and those who supported the Administration position. Under the compromise, the tests were allowed to go forward subject to the presidential certification specified by the Tsongas Amendment.[11] The President signed the bill to avoid further budget delay. Some authors considered the inclusion of the certification requirement to be the direct result of a successful Soviet propaganda campaign to exploit the lack of bipartisan consensus in Congress on US ASAT policy.[12]

The Administration Digs In

The space-based target test planned for early 1984 was delayed due to problems in ASAT system development. As the anticipated hard target test date passed and the 31 March 1984 deadline for the presidential certification required for testing approached, the debate continued in subcommittee hearings in both the House and the Senate. The Union of Concerned Scientists, the Federation of

American Scientists, the Council for a Livable World, and Common Cause were pitted against the Defense Department. These groups and a growing number of Congressmen expressed concern that the debate was the last chance to halt an armaments escalation similar to the MIRV expansion of the 70's.

Richard Perle, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, meanwhile, told the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee that "we cannot foresee now the means of verification." His comments preceded the Administration's formal response on 31 March to Congress that negotiations were useless because of verification difficulties.[13] The President's report, along with the testimony of Administration spokesmen, persuaded the House to drop its demands that the US seek a comprehensive ASAT ban with the Soviets from the 1985 Defense Bill.[14]

The Senate, however, rejected the Administration arguments on non-verifiability and declared on 12 June that no further tests could be conducted until the Administration complied with the certification requirements of the Tsongas Amendment. A stipulation was added that required assurance that ASAT testing would not violate the 1972 ABM testing ban. This measure was passed as an amendment to the 1985 defense authorization bill by a 61-28 vote despite an unprecedented two hour classified session that included a threat briefing from the Central Intelligence Agency. The issue then went to a House-Senate conference with a 30 day suspense. Taking note of the Senate vote, a senior Administration arms control official predicted several days later that negotiations

with the Soviets would be under way before the election. The amendment was revised in conference to defer tests until after 1 Mar 1985.[15]

At about the same time, the Soviets publicly invited the United States to meet in Vienna in September to begin talks to ban weapons in space. After weeks of charges and counter charges from both sides about setting preconditions for the talks, the matter was dropped. The two countries later agreed to meet in Geneva for umbrella talks on both offensive and defensive weapons. The talks eventually began in March of 1985.[16]

1985- The Successful Launch and Death of the F-15 ASAT

With the opening of the negotiations in Geneva, the Administration could point to their compliance with the desires of Congress. Congress, however, under the leadership of several vocal opponents of the ASAT program was increasingly willing to seize the initiative in legislating arms control. The House voted in June of 1985 to impose a one year moratorium on flight testing of the ASAT system as long as the Soviets continued to refrain from testing similar systems. This moratorium was later approved in conference with the Senate as part of the 1986 defense appropriations bill.

At the same time, the Air Force initiated a study to determine if the F-15 ASAT system still met the projected threat or whether changes would be needed. This study was ordered by Secretary of the Air Force Aldridge as a result of slippages and cost increases due to technical problems and congressional actions on FY 84 and 85 program funding.[17] These reservations followed

published reports of doubts among Navy admirals of the need for an ASAT system and a statement from the Air Force Chief of Staff that he supported a verifiable ASAT ban.[18]

The debate intensified in the technical press as a proposed September launch against a space-based target approached. On 20 August 85, President Reagan sent a presidential certification which stated that he believed the ASAT was necessary to national security and that testing would not impair negotiation prospects. On 11 September, the House Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Security, and Science met to consider the President's certification. Several members of the subcommittee expressed their concern over the arrival of the certification while the Congress was in recess.[19] The subcommittee upheld the President's certification, however, and the F-15 launched ASAT was successfully tested against an obsolete US satellite on 13 September.

Shortly after this successful test launch, the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment released a report with recommendations for future ASAT policy. The study concluded that strict arms control measures could not eliminate the threat of inherent ASAT capabilities of systems like ICBMs or provide complete confidence against the covert development or deployment of ASATs. A ban on testing could be beneficial for deterrence, however, because a system would not likely be used for national security without the high degree of confidence attained by extensive testing. The report went on to stress space asset survivability as a priority for future development. The Pentagon said the assessment was

objective but overly optimistic of possibilities for ASAT arms control.[20]

A month later, Rep George Brown (D-Ca) published a "Peace Report" newsletter in which he downplayed the Soviet ASAT as crude and not a real threat. Since Brown was regarded as an expert by his colleagues, his words carried great weight. In December, Congress approved a moratorium on ASAT tests for FY 86 as long as the Soviets continued to refrain from testing.[21] Similar moratoriums were included in the defense bills for the following two years until the Air Force canceled the program due to budget constraints and the stagnation in development induced by the testing ban.

Epilogue

The F-15 ASAT was canceled in 1988 but the debate has continued as the US military has become ever more dependent on secure space systems. President Bush has made satellite survivability and a new ASAT part of his space policy, incorporating many of the proposals from the 1985 report from the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment.

The new ASAT system, to be built by the Army, was sold to Congress partially through its lower cost and treaty verifiability.[22] DOD now emphasizes the selective use of ASATs against low orbit targets without serious consideration of more provocative attacks against strategic systems.[23] Recognizing the Congressional attitude toward testing in space that resulted in the cancellation of the F-15 ASAT, DOD officials say the new system can be demonstrated without firing.[24]

The Soviets still have their operational ASAT system. Although the system has not been tested as a unit since 1982, component parts are exercised frequently enough to give them a credible system. Despite cuts in other areas, Soviet military space efforts are still fully funded.[25]

There have been no arms control treaties which ban ASATs but negotiations continue.

ENDNOTES

1. Earlier systems depended on a nuclear warhead. The nuclear method became an unacceptable technique to both sides as space systems proliferated (potential for collateral damage of friendly systems) and arms control agreements prohibiting nuclear weapons in space were signed. As a result, both the US and Soviet ASAT efforts were focused on kinetic kill and directed energy systems. The F-15 ASAT and the operational Soviet systems are kinetic kill weapons which means the weapon must hit the target. Directed energy weapons developments proceeded during this period but the debate discussed here was most concerned about near term capability and the potential for escalation. Aspen Strategy Group, Seeking Stability in Space, ed. by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. and James A. Schear, 1987, p. 10.

2. President Carter quoted by Marcia S. Smith, ASATs: Antisatellite Weapons Systems, Congressional Research Service Issue Brief, 7 Dec 1989.

3. The problems with the definition of the term "weapons" center on the fact that almost anything that can be launched into space could be used as an ASAT as long as it could be guided to a collision with another object in space. Further, the term could also be applied more liberally to reconnaissance and communications platforms depending on the context of their use. Paul B. Stares, Space and National Security, The Brookings Institution, 1987, p.73.

4. "Arms Control and the Militarization of Space", Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, Ocean, International Operations, and Environment, 20 Sep 82, p. 42.

5. R. Jeffrey Smith, "Administration Resists Demands for ASAT Ban", Science, 23 Oct 83, p. 394.

6. R. Jeffrey Smith, p. 395.

7. Henry F. Cooper, "Anti-Satellite Systems and Arms Control: Lessons from the Past", Strategic Review, Spring 1989, p. 43.

8. R. Jeffrey Smith, p. 396.

9. Henry F. Cooper, p. 43.

10. R. Jeffrey Smith, p. 396.

11. R. Jeffrey Smith, "House Committee Votes to Delay ASAT Deployment", Science, 4 Nov 83, p. 488.

12. Henry F. Cooper, p. 41.

13. R. Jeffrey Smith, "Reagan Intends to Resist Congress on ASAT Treaty", Science, 30 Mar 84, p. 1374.

14. Henry F. Cooper, p. 44.

15. R. Jeffrey Smith, "Senate Creates Pressure for ASAT Negotiations", Science, 29 Jun 84, p. 1412.

16. Marcia S. Smith, p. 10.

17. "House Votes 1-Year Ban on ASAT Tests", Aviation Week and Space Technology, 1 Jul 85, p. 27.

18. Kai Bird and Max Holland, "The ASAT Stick", The Nation, 21 Sep 85, p. 229.

19. "The President's Certification on Anti-Satellite (ASAT) Weapons Testing", Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Security, and Science, 11 Sep 85, p. 1 and p. 57.

20. Robert R. Ropelewski, "Congressional Office Warns Arms Pacts Will Not Halt ASAT Threat", Aviation Week and Space Technology, 30 Sep 1985, p. 20.

21. James E. Oberg, "Congress Covers Up Soviet Space Weapons", National Review, 14 Feb 86, p. 25.

22. "Army Presses Case for Ground Based ASAT", Aviation Week and Space Technology, 4 Dec 89, p. 47.

23. Marcia S. Smith, p.8.

24. "Rockwell Selected as Sole Contractor for $100 Million ASAT Design Effort", Aviation Week and Space Technology, 23 Jul 90, p. 30.

25. Department of Defense, Soviet Military Power 1990, September 1990, p. 59-60.